



THE OWL BAR

THE HISTORIC OWL BAR IS LUCKY TO HAVE A MAN LIKE
AARON LUNA WHO GIVES A HOOT

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

In crafting a multi-part series on historic bars, restaurants, and taverns in and around Maryland and Washington, D.C., one of the most obvious venues that came to this journalist's mind and just

had to be featured was The Owl Bar in Baltimore City. The Owl Bar was built in 1903 as part of the original Belvedere Hotel. Back then, it was known simply as the Bar at The Belvedere and it was open only to men.

During the Prohibition era, though, the business became much more lax and allowed women (and whiskey). Consequently, it quickly became Charm City's most notorious speakeasy. That's when then-owner Colonel Consolvo added the infamous owl statues to the decor. The legend goes that when the Belvedere's basement was stocked with whiskey, the owls' eyes would

Aaron Luna
Director of Operations
Belvedere & Co.

wink.

It was the 1970s when the bar reopened as The Owl Bar. After going missing for decades, those original owls were returned to their home to watch over The Owl Bar patrons. And if you drown out such modern-day conveniences as beeping, chirping cellphones, you can practically hear, smell, and taste the history of the place.

Aaron Luna is Director of Operations at Belvedere and Co., which operates The Owl Bar. “The Owl Bar is tucked in the back corner off the lobby and is THE original speakeasy!” he stated, during a recent interview. “Our patrons love the moody vibe befitting of an authentic speakeasy. We feel there's a great appreciation for the original materials like the Gothic light fixtures, the masonry work of the 23-foot-high walls, the classic stained-glass rondels, and the original craftsmanship of the 50-foot-long bar, as well as a spectacular back bar that dates back to circa 1900. And, of course, a great place like The Owl Bar has the most welcoming staff.”

For Luna, finding the right Owl Bar staffer begins in the interview process: “I look at the potential candidate to see if they engage with a certain ease and warmth. If you're going to be behind one of the most iconic bars, obviously you need skills, but also a welcoming easy way about you. We've been very fortunate to find the right balance behind that bar.”

Of course, The Belvedere is no longer a hotel, but rather a condo building comprised of residences and businesses since 1990. Luna said, “We pull a lot of folks that reside in the building as well as the surrounding Mt Vernon neighborhood. We get a fair number of guests from the county and other Baltimore City neighborhoods that want a more casual ambience, great libations, and friendly ser-



vice. Since our events company, Belvedere & Co., hosts social gatherings and weddings primarily on the weekends, we'll also get a lot of those guests coming in either before the start of their event or at the end to cap off their special evening.”

For a small, independent establishment, The Owl Bar boasts a unique beverage menu for its diverse clientele. Its draft beer lineup rotates seasonally. But one constant fan favorite made exclusively for The Owl Bar is always available—the Owl Bar Lager, which is brewed by Founders Brewing Company. “Whenever we can, we like to feature local breweries,” remarked Luna. “Our bartenders are very engaged, and they appreciate feedback from our guests. We brought Bud Light & Michelob Ultra on tap because people loved how much they preferred it over bottled.”

He added, “Our cocktails are center stage. We have our classics, but with a twist. We have a popular Peruvian drink, Chicha Sour. We get rave reviews on our Bacon Hazelnut Old Fashioned and the Owl Espresso Martini, which has our unique touch. All of our syrups are prepared in house. Even the ginger syrup is made fresh from ginger root. We also have a nice top shelf selection – Lagavulin 16 Scotch, Elyah Craig Barrel Proof Bourbon, and Clase Azul Anejo Tequila, to



**The Bacon Hazelnut Old Fashioned &
The Owl Espresso Martini**

Jacque York & Sergio Palestina
Bartenders Extraordinaire
The Owl Bar

mention a few.”

The Owl Bar’s wine selection was undergoing a refresh at the time of this interview in late August. A large cross-section of Luna’s clientele had expressed a willingness to experiment with wines they haven’t tried before. “Although our dinner menu is a more casual fare, people still like a nice wine with their really great Belvedere Burger,” he said. “Fourteen years ago when this owner came in, you wouldn’t see Silverado Cabernet from Napa or Brancott Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand offered, but this is where our clientele is today.”

Luna feels very fortunate to be part of such a historic establishment and a company so dedicated to customer service. Although his title is Director of Operations, he wears many hats. “One of the perks for me is the creativity I express in our beverage development and food menus,” he stated. “I really enjoy meeting with our vendors, exploring the trends and the overall market. Being part of this culturally rich landmark is so rewarding! I have found a home.”

In terms of challenges, Luna listed the business decision that was made not too long ago to reduce The Owl Bar’s hours of operation and make the most of the hours the establishment is open. The rising cost of goods and services is also something he deals with.



Through it all, he keeps a stiff upper lip and lives by the advice: “You’re only as good as you are today. Always strive to do better tomorrow!”

When asked if he had any advice for others reading this who would love to be at the reins of a historic bar, tavern, or restaurant one day, he was quick to provide counsel. “Start with heart,” he said. “Surround yourself with good people, lead with integrity, and be good stewards of your establishment. And always remember your ‘why.’ I do. The hospitality industry is in my bones. I can’t imagine I would love it as much as I do if it were predictable and steady!” ■



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